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## The Clipper Visits Bob Gunnarson

By Nancy McCafferty



Bob Gunnarson

The game of golf is one of the oldest of modern sports. Some historians claim that it originated in Scotland while others say it descended from the game of "kolf" played on the ice in Holland. However, golf as we know it today undoubtedly came from Scotland, transported here by Robert Lockhart and introduced to John Reid who, with 4 others, formed the first golf club in the U.S. in 1888. But all that is irrelevant. Golf should be fun or so thinks Bob Gunnarson, the teaching pro at the Duxbury Yacht Club.

"Golf has sent a lot of people to their graves," he says. "If a person is so uptight about it, he should be doing something else." Gunnarson believes in keeping it simple. He tries to relax a player, beginner or advanced, and put him at ease. Once that is done, they're ready to go to work.

The basics start with a proper grip (interlocking, overlapping, or just the good old baseball bat hold -- whichever is comfortable), stance, fundamental forward and backward swings. "Everybody can do it," he says. Improvement can take as little as a day or week or as long as a year, depending on the player's attitude. "Sometimes people are so tense or disappointed in themselves that it never happens. But if they're determined, there's no limit to how far they can go."

over the greens, but Bob Gunnarson plays it low-key. "Don't make this appear bigger than it is," he said. He seems a man confident enough not to have to stoop to boasting. He refuses to inflate his achievements but is secure in the knowledge that they are just that.

Gunnarson was the pro at North Hill Country Club in Duxbury from 1975 to 1978 and moved to the yacht club in 1980. Since he spent much of his childhood and adolescence on this course, it was like coming home again. He recalled that somewhere around the age of 12, it occurred to him that the yacht club would be a nice place to work and is pleased that the wheel of fortune turned in his favor.

As the teaching pro, he deals with all levels of players and conducts clinics for juniors, women and men. He has a full day and is busy from dawn until eve. "Long job, short season" is the way he describes the March to November existence. His mind is geared to golf almost exclusively. He doesn't want to miss anything that's going on and lies awake thinking, planning, and trying to stay 2 steps ahead as Ray Dennehy ascribed. Gunnarson acknowledges the superb support he has at the yacht club with assistants Chuck Walkey, Darrin Eddy and Trip Evans. Charles Pullen is the superintendent, who ensures scenic and well-manicured grounds.

"There's no unsolvable problem in golf," Gunnarson says. "Good target perception is needed just like an archer or a kid with a sling shot. But most important is practice. You should practice more than you play to keep the tempo, the rhythm going. The more you do it, the better you'll get, just like anything else. It's up to the individual. If you make up your mind you can do it, you will."

Television and Arnold Palmer have contributed greatly to the popularity of golf. Public courses are available and that has really expanded the game. The courses themselves have changed. Older courses have smaller greens which used to be cut by hand. Their fairways are tighter and there is more rough. The emphasis is on shot making, imaginative and skillful. Courses built since 1960 have enlarged greens and the fairways have opened up. With modern equipment, the grounds are easier to maintain. Golf clubs are primed for power and balls are now designed to travel farther and thus the long straight-away shot has come into style. There is still plenty of exercise in golf. The average walk in a 9-hole game is 4 miles (unless you cop out and use a golf cart).

Outfitting a person for golf can cost anywhere from \$4 to \$400. Yard sales are sometimes a good find for beginners and a basic 6 club set (2 woods, 3-4 irons and a putter) will start you off and swinging. A good age for a child to begin is somewhere in the area

Bob Gunnarson reflects that determination. A lifelong resident of Duxbury, he began at the age of 8 shagging balls for the Yacht Club pro, John Lucey, in return for lessons. "I listened and learned from a master," Gunnarson says. He worked as a caddy for several years and observed that "the good players swing consistently while the bad players hit 100 different ways." There were other duties, too, such as working in the pro shop and washing golf clubs, sometimes 50-60 sets a day. By 1964, Gunnarson was out on the course itself, cutting greens, raking sand traps, and doing other grounds work considered a step beyond caddying. All the while, he played golf, perfecting his game, practicing, competing in junior tournaments, watching, listening, and still keeping his sense of humor intact. He considers having worked all levels of golf a distinct advantage because of the knowledge he has gained at each step. The best teachers are not tunnel-visioned players, but Renaissance men of golf.

In 1965 when Gunnarson graduated from DHS, he had been captain of the golf club, active in basketball (I wasn't tall enough), football ("Those other guys were huge!"), and had played baseball for years. He attended Northeastern and then went to the Kittansett Club in Marion where Ray Dennehy was the pro and Gunnarson became his assistant. "I learned everything from him," says Gunnarson. "Ray Dennehy had been the assistant pro at Pinehurst in South Carolina in the World War I era and a club designer. Then he came to the Kittansett Club and when I caught up with him, he'd been there 45 years. The man was a genius at golf. He was always 2 steps ahead of everyone else."

During the 7 years with Ray Dennehy, Bob Gunnarson took a crack at the PGA school. To become a member of the PGA, and thus qualified to teach and play pro golf, one must complete this school. The sponsorship of 2 pros is needed to merit entrance consideration. A student is required to work for a Class A pro for 40 months, earning credit per month. If the future PGA player is affiliated with a pro whose club is in cold weather country, those 40 months can stretch out to 6 or 7 years. The curriculum includes rules, methods of teaching, playing, with an emphasis on how to handle players and their problems or, more importantly, to recognize and correct before problems develop. A written exam and a playing test must be passed. After all of these requisites are met, the students are elected into the PGA, that is, all other PGA members decide whether the student has graduated into its ranks, and if there is any objections from any sector of the country, that student is denied admission. Gunnarson had 150 in his class in West Palm Beach, Fla., graduated #1 in the midst of such players as Hale Erwin, George Johnson, Marty Fleckman, and Kermit Zarley. Making it is enough to break out in cartwheels all

it is," says Gunnarson. "One of the most difficult things to do is to remake a grip or a swing that someone has been using incorrectly for 10 years. People tend to resist the change even if they know they can't improve with their present method. On the other hand, seeing people succeed with the changes in their games I've recommended, watching them get better and better at it is really gratifying."

It is Gunnarson's firm conviction that there should be no injuries in golf. With proper warm-up nothing should be pulled or strained. However, there is that golf ball hurtling through the air. "When you hear 'Fore!' duck and cover your head," he says. "Getting hit with a ball is one of the most common injuries in golf. It doesn't happen often but that's the one with the highest percentage." Spiro Agnew, we can forgive you that after all these years.

Gunnarson plays the New Hampshire Open each year and has competed in the New England Open where in 1976, he got a hole in one. Being a regular on the pro circuit can be grinding. Professional golfers have the choice of becoming a playing pro or a teaching pro. Competition, constant travel and uprooting, even the element of entertainment due to TV coverage can burn the circuit player out in less than 20 years. When the Jack Nicklauses and Ben Crenshaws develop ailments, they turn to a teaching pro like Bob Gunnarson for the remedy. No golfer wants to fade at 40 but for the strictly circuit pro, it happens regularly, is even anticipated. Bob Gunnarson hopes to still be accelerating at 40. He mentions teaching pros in the south, men in their 70's who shoot their ages in golf. It's the swing -- will it stand the test of time? "If you use only your muscles to swing, it won't last," says Gunnarson, "but, if you use your mind, you'll play golf forever." He plans on being around the course for a long time.